

[Laundry Workers]

Beliefs and Customs - Folk Stuff

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Vivian Morris

ADDRESS 225 West 130th Street, N.Y.C.

DATE March 9, 1939

SUBJECT Laundry Workers

1. Date and time of [?] Observation

March 8th. 11:10 A.M. to 12 Noon.

2. Place of [?] observation

West End Laundry 41th Street between 10th & 11th Avenues.

3. Name and address of informant

4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.

5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

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6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

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NEW YORK

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Vivian Morris

ADDRESS 225 West 130th Street, N.Y.C.

DATE March 9, 1939

SUBJECT Laundry Workers LAUNDRY WORKERS

The foreman of the ironing department of the laundry eyed me suspiciously and then curtly asked me, "what you want?" I showed him a Laundry Workers Union card (which I borrowed from an unemployed laundry worker, in order to insure my admittance) and told him that I used to work in this laundry and I thought I would drop in and take a friend of mine who worked there, out to lunch.

He squinted at the clock and said, "Forty minutes before lunch time. Too hot in here and how. Better wait outside."

"But," I remonstrated, "the heat doesn't bother me. I used to work in here."

"Say," he ignored my argument "no fishy back talk and get outside." He watched me until I was out of sight and then he left the room. I promptly darted back into the ironing room where my friend worked.

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The clanging of metal as the pistons bang into the sockets, the hiss of steam, women wearily pushing twelve pound irons, women mechanically tending machines, one, button half 2 of the shirt done, two, top finished, three, sleeves pressed and the shirt is ready for the finishers, that is the scene that greeted me as I stood in the Laundry's ironing department.

Shirts, thousands of white shirts that produce such a dazzling glare that the women who work in this department wear dark glasses to protect their eyes. The heat is almost unbearable; there seems to be gushes of damp heat pushed at you from some invisible force in the mechanism of the machine. The smooth shiny faced women work in silence, occasionally dropping a word here and there, slowly wiping away dripping perspiration, then back to the machines, to the heavy irons without any outward show of emotion — no protest. The morning has been long and arduous, this is Wednesday — a heavy day but thank God half the day is nearly over.

The heavy, strong armed women pauses, the iron, arms unflex and she glances at the clock. She smiles. Forty-five minutes until eating time. A soft contralto voice gives vent to a hymn, a cry of protest, as only the persecuted can sing, warm, plaintive, yet with a hidden buoyancy of exultation that might escape a person who has not also felt the pathos, and hopes of a downtrodden, exploited people.

She sings, a trifle louder, "Could my tears forever flow, could my zeal no languor know. Thou must save, and thou alone, these fo' sin could not atone; In my hand no price I bring. Simply to his cross I cling."

The women tend their machines to the tempo of the hymn. They all join in on the chorus, their voices blend beautifully, though untrained and unpolished they voice the same soulful 3 sentiment, "Rock of Ages, cleft for me. Let me hid myself in thee." Stanza after stanza rings from their lips voicing oppression centuries old, but the song rings out that the inner

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struggle for real freedom still lights a fiery spark in the recesses of the souls of these toiling women.

The song ends as it began with soft words and humming. One squat, attractive young woman, who single-handedly handles three of the shirt machines, begins a spirited hymn in militant tempo, with a gusto that negates the earlier attitude of fatigue the entire crew of the ironing room joins in either humming or singing. They are entering the final hour before lunch but to judge from the speed which the song has spurred them to, you would believe they were just beginning. The perspiration drips copiously but it is forgotten. The chorus of the hymn zooms forth. "Dare to Be a Daniel, Dare to stand alone. Dare to have a purpose firm and make it known — and make it known." The woman who finishes the laces with the twelve pound iron wields it with feathery swiftness and sings her stanza as the others hum and put in a word here and there. "Many a mighty gal is lost daring' not to stand (The words of the next line were overcome by the rise in the humming, but the last line was clear and resonant) "By Joinin' Daniel's band." The chorus was filled with many pleasing adlibs and then another took up a stanza. Finally the song dies away.

Then the squat machine handler says to the finisher who guides the big iron, "Come on baby, sing' at song you made up by yourself. The Heavy Iron Blues."

Without further coaxing the girl addressed as baby 4 cleared her throat and began singing. "I lift my iron Lawd, heavy as a ton of nails. I lif' my i'on Lawd, heavy as a ton of nails, but it pays my rent cause my man's still layin' in jail. Got the blues, blues, got the Heavy i'on Blues; but my feet's in good shoes, so doggone the heavy i'on blues."

Then she starts the second stanza which is equally as light but carries some underlying food for thought. "I lif' my i'on Lawd, all the livelong day. Ilif' my i'on Lawd, all the live long day, cause dat furniture bill I know I got to pay, Got the Blues, blues, got the Heavy Iron blues, but, I pay my union dues, so doggone the Heavy I'on Blues."

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There is a sound of whistles from the direction of the river and the girls drop whatever they are doing and there are many sight of relief. Lunchtime.